

Now starring in *Love Birds*, Rhys Darby has previously appeared in comedy films *Yes Man* and *The Boat That Rocked*



PHOTO: KATE LITTLE

Rhys Darby

The stand-up comic, actor and *Flight of the Conchords* alumnus recalls alien attacks, the army and his worst heckler

I remember...

... being the baby of the house. My three sisters and brother were a lot older. I was nine years behind the next youngest, so I felt as if I had six parents. I got a lot of attention. Humour was big in our house; we always saw the lighter side of life. I was the class clown; replying with weird answers to the teachers' questions. I'd go off on a tangent that made no sense and the other kids would laugh.

... setting up the DICs Club with my mates. It stood for Dangerous Intelligence Commandos. I was the officer, and we had a tent and a flagpole. We would go down to the army surplus store, buy water bottles and maps, then head to a park and set up camp.

We'd go on little tramps and have adventures. I'd say, "Right, there's been an alien attack" and we'd go into the bush and try to find them. There was

a lot of make-believe, storytelling, trying to save the world. I lived in a dream world.

... the excitement of going to the grand old Civic Theatre in Auckland as a kid. To me, it's the most fantastic theatre in the world. Going to see a movie there was an absolute spectacle. I'd look at the stars studding the ceiling, the giant lions in the alcoves, and this big curtain would come up. I saw great films there, like the Star Wars and Indiana Jones series.

To be able to perform my stand-up show, *It's Rhys Darby Night!*, at the Civic, and record it for my second DVD, felt really special.

... why I joined the army, and why I left. When I was a teenager, my mates and I watched every war film ever made: all the World War II ones, John Wayne ones, Clint Eastwood ones, as well as *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Hamburger Hill*.

So at 17, I joined the army – all from watching war films! I wanted to be a jet fighter pilot but I couldn't pass the physics exams, my eyesight wasn't brilliant and I was a little too tall to fit in the cockpit. So I thought, *Oh*

well, I'll be a soldier. I'll put my helmet on and drive a tank, and parachute in and rescue prisoners from POW camps and get medals.

I became a signaller trained in morse code, but after three years I got lost in the middle of the bush one night and I panicked. Then it clicked: what I really wanted to be was the actor playing the soldier. So I got out. Now I can be anything as long as I follow a script.

... my first stand-up gig. Two comics, Mike King and Andrew Clay, came down to Christchurch to perform.

I saw an ad in the paper saying they were doing an open spot and locals could have a go. I'd already been dabbling in comedy writing and sketch comedy at university, so I turned up. I had three minutes and I just came out and did some Frank Spencer impersonations and

it brought the house down. Well, a few people laughed. I didn't see it as a vocation until I realised you could earn money doing it – and that's only recent.

... giving up my day job. I was doing stand-up in Edinburgh at night and

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Flight of the Conchords' co-stars (from left) Darby, Jemaine Clement and Bret McKenzie, Below, with wife Rosie last year in Auckland



working at a clothing store by day. Then I went to London and did a couple of gigs at The Comedy Store, a really big venue, and an agent came up to me and said, "I want to take you on". I came back to Edinburgh on the bus and said to my wife Rosie: "I've given up my day job and we've got to move to London." She was pretty angry that I hadn't discussed it with her, but I was right: within a month I was earning enough every week to survive. I thought, *Wow, I'm a proper comic!*

... the worst heckle I ever got. The guy who yelled out, "Tell us a joke!" He was a bit drunk and he came into the pub in the middle of a story while I was doing these weird noises and impressions. I said, "I don't tell jokes; I perform them. If you want a joke, read a joke



Darby takes flight again in local romantic comedy *Love Birds*. Above, with co-star Bryan Brown who plays Dr Buster and, below, as the hapless Doug

book." I've never been heckled much. But if people chat, I do a really loud helicopter noise on the microphone.

... finding out that HBO had given *Flight of the Conchords* the green light. I didn't have an agent then so I had no-one to tell me, and the guys were real slack - Bret [McKenzie] and Jemaine [Clement] never phone you. So, I only found out when I got an email from some HBO department asking me about visa details. And I'm like, "Does this mean we've got the series?" And they replied, "Yeah, hurry up, we need your details." That was surreal.

... worrying I'd be the third wheel. I'd known both Bret and Jemaine well for



a long time, and they've always been my favourite act, so I didn't have an ounce of doubt about whether the show would be any good. But I was very concerned that I wouldn't be loved, that I'd be a third wheel, that I'd be the dick on the side because it was all about them. When I saw the pilot, I thought, *Hang on, Murray's quite funny*. That's when we felt like a trio. Every day was a joy. The funniest moments were in my office; they'd come for a band meeting and we'd do the roll-call and try to keep straight faces.

It didn't get better than singing in my first music video, *Leggy Blonde*. Taika Waititi came over and directed it. It was him, me, Bret and Jemaine: all Kiwis surrounded by Americans going "What's going on?"

... becoming a romantic hero. The comic actors I look up to, like Steve Martin and Peter Sellers, have played romantic roles and so I felt I'd definitely do a romantic comedy at some point. After *Flight of the Conchords*, I just leapt into the action in the UK and US.

So when I got this New Zealand script called *Love Birds* (see review on page 134), the first thing that impressed me

was the location: it was filming down the road in Auckland. Very handy. And it was a lead role, a completely different role to what I've done before, and a chance to finally play someone who wasn't a kooky loser. And it felt like it

had been written for me - bits of my life were in it, like cycling over the harbour bridge and wearing a spacesuit.

... realising how lucky I am to be a New Zealander. That didn't happen until I left. I lived in London for seven years but I found it too intense, like the Tube taking an hour to travel 20 metres.

I missed New Zealand a lot. Growing up here, you take it for granted: all these great parks to play in and bush to run around in and beaches to swim in. We'd jump on our skateboards and head down to the park and hang out by the fish-and-chips shop and stay out till 8pm. It was a different world. Geez, your radius of play as a kid must be a lot bigger in Pakuranga than it would be in London. I'd be as worried as hell if my kids [Finn, 5, and Theo, 1] went to play on any street in London. In New Zealand, they'll get to enjoy the same things I did. ■

As told to Sarah Lang

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